

## Lessons From the City of Angels

*This narrative examines how discussions dealing with diversity can turn intense and uncomfortable. Not only my peers, but also my students, advised me to exert more control over the discussions in class. However, by listening to my instincts and allowing the students to continue to express themselves, I introduced an exercise that allowed them to discuss diversity from their personal viewpoints. This was a turning point, for myself and the class, teaching the need for unity in a multicultural world.*

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I started my undergraduate practice class with some excitement. I had volunteered to teach this class as a diversion and respite from teaching the graduate practice classes. I anticipated a very basic curriculum and felt great freedom to draw selectively from my materials in response to the needs and temperament of the students. I could focus on my favorite areas, which are communication and experiential exercises. I was also excited by the diversity in the class, over 60% minority—a classroom of faces from many countries, backgrounds, and languages.

Sometimes I walk against the tide of CSULB students toward the food plaza at lunchtime. I see young people representing many cultures and reflecting the shifts in immigration, which are characteristic of Los Angeles. Although graduate students are diverse in age and ethnicity, they are typically career tracked and well socialized as students: they are meticulously cooperative and responsible about assignments, classroom attendance, and discussions. Undergraduates at this

state university are vibrant, academic novices and represent a broader array of nationalities, ages, and levels of maturity and experience. They are often untutored in classroom procedures, uncertain, and unpredictable.

The class started smoothly, without conflict. About six weeks into the class, it began. We launched into a discussion of child abuse reporting and child discipline practices. Two African-American students, Zackery and John<sup>1</sup>, took issue with Gloria, a white student, who had suggested defusing angry parents (such as those you might see about to hit their child in the supermarket). The seating in the classroom influenced the discussion. There was a projection booth in the middle of the rear wall. The class of 40 students was tightly squeezed, with quieter students hovered to either side of the booth, who were completely invisible to each other. Zackery and John typically sat near the door to the right of the booth. The discussion grew more heated. Zackery was a mature single father: his position was that people shouldn't

<sup>1</sup>With the exception of John Casey, who played the central role and collaborated in the production of this article, names and identities have been changed to protect the privacy of the students.



interfere in other people's family business. He spoke longer than he needed to make his point and was basically holding the floor, repeating himself, excited and frustrated—still invisible to students in the rear on the opposite side of the projection booth. One of the themes that followed was that people wouldn't dare to interfere in others' conflicts—they could be the target of violence themselves. This position was countered by the image of the placated parent who had been distracted from lashing out by the sympathetic words of a stranger.

John, a tall, stocky young man, emerged shortly from the invisible spot to the right of the projection booth and came to the side of the class. He stood, bold, defensive, and angry, feeling that he needed to defend his right to discipline his children as he chose. We had already established that injury was illegal, but corporal punishment was not. He waved his arm and said he could hit his child in public if he wanted, and he'd hit anyone who stood in his way. He stood towering over students on his side of the class, immediately next to Fortunata, an older Filipino student who had been injured and was on crutches.

The discussion erupted, students raising their hands in protest. I counted off the hands in order as to who would speak. Ann Marie, a Latina leader of the student organization, made a fine, impassioned statement

about the need to take a public stand to care for others in spite of urban malaise and indifference. Someone made the point

that many parents don't know what's best and need to learn more humane ways of disciplining their children. Thu, who had immigrated from Vietnam, said she was hit as a child and, in resentment, turned away from her parents.

Other students also said they were hit as children but had continued to love and respect their parents.

I was taken aback by the intensity of the discussion, but I had been part of other intense discussions. I felt that having a say was the most immediate need of students and continued to count off. Beyond establishing what was or wasn't legal, I didn't direct or comment on their remarks. It set me thinking about my own experiences: I had never been spanked myself and I refrained from spanking my own child after one or two mild taps as a trial.

As the class ended, Fortunata accosted me and said that I should not allow such a discussion. I was still flustered from the intensity of the class session. When she cited another instructor who insisted on more order, I said that I wanted students to be free to express themselves. Instructors had different styles, I said. This, however, was just the beginning.

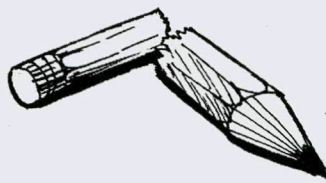
I had hardly reached my office when Zackery and John,

who had been the center of the corporal punishment and family rights position, came to visit. As we talked, John intimated he felt defensive, called on to speak for African-American people. He also said that I should take greater control of the class to prevent side conversations, though he admitted he, too, was an offender. I appreciated his candor and thanked him. Not much later, José and Gloria visited. José had demonstrated that he was a mature, patient, and reliable class participant. They explained that there had been conflict amongst students in this class since it began. There was subgrouping... and again they said that I needed to take more control.

I was now convinced that I was the newcomer in this group. The dynamics had been well established over the past year, and the students needed greater safety. I greeted the students at the next class session and presented a method of control, explaining that several students had requested it. When I needed their attention, or felt side conversations were disrupting the class, I would raise my hand and they would also until

the room was silent. They readily agreed. I asked if any students had wanted to say something but felt

intimidated by the intensity of the discussion. A cluster of hands went up. I asked if anyone *was* comfortable with the level of intensity. I really should have raised my hand myself... but no one did. I thought that if



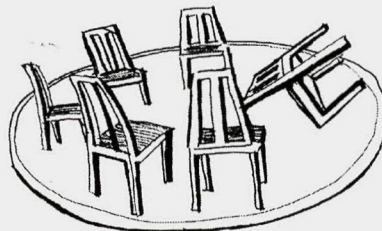


they couldn't understand each other's strong feelings and opinions, they would be ill prepared to understand their clients' feelings. I explained that the class was about understanding differences, learning empathy, and that members of their own class didn't feel understood. *All* of the students who had come to see me had said something to this effect, and this need set the tone for the coming sessions.

In the next sessions we worked on empathy and reflective listening. Then I discovered Rogerian rhetoric. This is a method of discussing controversial topics in which no one can state his or her own position until successfully restating the opponent's position—to the satisfaction of the opponent. If another intense discussion arose, I thought that we could resort to Rogerian rhetoric. This would surely slow things down and force understanding before moving on. But I was disappointed: I'd lost the sense of freedom. Class attendance was uneven.

Somewhere along the way, two students who had played little role in the tense discussion spoke to me about an exam. Rhonda was an African-American student and employed mother of three, and Jennifer was a white student active in the student association. They volunteered their views on the tense class session: They thought the tension wasn't really a racial issue. I also saw that much tension was a result of an isolated subgroup, and over the next several weeks, Zackery and

John were often missing from class. I tried to connect with them. I spoke with Zackery before class one day and he assured me he seldom missed class. However, 15 minutes after I started the session, he was not present. John sulked during one class when I showed a video. He couldn't possibly see the screen from the corner behind the projection booth and I motioned for him to come forward. He declined but looked depressed.



After empathy and Rogerian rhetoric, I turned to an ethnic exercise that had always produced an opening to personal aspects of diversity in my classes. Students traced their ancestors, elicited the response of others to their ancestors, and examined their family strengths. Ethnicity applies to everyone, although white students may take it for granted more than people of color who must deal with racism and discrimination. During the next session, I introduced the exercise by explaining the clumsiness and travesty of the simple census classification system that forces people into a few categories. I stressed our own diversity—the multiple ethnic influences that were part of most families and the inadequacy of any classification system.

The session was good. I was delighted that Zackery presented first. This indeed was a shift, since he had been absent a lot over the past several weeks. He was eloquent: he spoke of White and Black ancestors, including a famous political figure. Estella spoke about listing herself as Mexican-American, but her heritage was really Native American and Spanish, and she and her ancestors were all born in the United States. Then the students digressed to a discussion of skin color, and I felt immediately uneasy. A Latino student whose family was prejudiced in favor of lighter skin introduced the topic. Others—Japanese and African-American students—also talked about their family's prejudices. But I was worried because of the sensitivity of the topic. I didn't want anyone to feel disparaged and I sharply felt my own "whiteness."

Several White students entered into the discussion during this session, telling of their own European-American heritage. Marina in particular was a recent immigrant and wanted to tell the story of her immigration from Russia. She was clear that she had not been discriminated against because she was white. After class, she approached José saying she felt guilty because she hadn't had to deal with ethnic discrimination. Again, I recognized this as a necessary and constructive part of the discussion. But I felt uneasy because so many students had been critical of the previous tense discussion. Miraculously, the response was a complete re-



versal. Students approached me in the hall after class to tell me how much they had enjoyed the session. I tried to calm myself and told them we would continue on the topic during the next session.

It was the second session of the "ethnic exploration" exercise that was beyond my imagination. I must admit, I had feared a repeat of tense conversations and had daydreamed a solution in which I took John's hand and brought him to the front of the class, calming him and allowing him to tell his side without the edge of anger. In my own WASP family, I tried for a mediator role when tensions were high.

I opened the class by summarizing common reactions to the exercise: bicultural students sometimes feel they belonged to both and neither group; minority students may need to tell their story of discrimination; and White students sometimes feel guilty or like "ethnic orphans," taking ethnicity for granted. I looked out at the class. In this session there were close to forty students whereas in the previous session there had been a little over twenty. I had planned to say more but I didn't. They were expectant and full of their own words and I invited them to speak. After a tentative hush, Nancy, an effusive and warm White woman came forward and told her story, drawing her genealogy on the board. We all applauded as we had the previous session for her risk taking and contribution to the class.

"Next?" I said. I had already attempted to rid the room of the projection box obstacle by bringing the seats somewhat forward. To my surprise, John, who was usually barely visible, was sitting in front of the booth instead of behind it. He raised his hand and when I called on him, he walked slowly to the front of the room. He started tentatively and then said, "I want to apologize to the class." He explained that he realized some people felt threatened by his behavior during the child discipline discussion. All eyes were fixed on him and when he paused, the class applauded. I stepped in to say, "It took a lot of courage to come forward and apologize." As he continued, I was again looking at the faces of his fellow students. Rhonda was smiling with pride at him. Jennifer, who sometimes looked sullen, was also looking with pride at him. Somewhere along the line, he said how different we all were, "We have to all get along." These words came back to me as a primal inter-ethnic cry for unity since Rodney King had said the same words after being beaten by the police and after the resultant wrenching Los Angeles riots in 1992. When he was finished the class clapped again and he returned to his seat—in front of the projection booth.

And then they spoke, one after another. Students took turns coming to the front of the class. One told how she emi-

grated from Rumania to escape communism. Two students discovered they had come from towns nearby in Mexico. Fumiko, a Japanese student, told of her marriage to an American husband. She had tried being a traditional wife at first, serving him, and he wasn't used to being given so much help. He asked her, "Do you think I'm disabled?" Her presentation was polished, humorous, and the class roared with laughter as she described some of the misunderstood phrases and words during her early months learning English. Then came Melanie, a European-American student who had no sense of heritage. "I was adopted. Although

I love my adoptive parents, I feel I have no biological heritage. I'm fascinated with family resemblance, because I don't know anything about my genetic ties." The class ended with Tenoa, a Samoan stu-

dent who has a German relative somewhere in his past and whose entire extended family lived together.

When our class time was gone, I asked how many more wanted to speak. Again hands went up and I promised to return again to the topic. As the class closed, I explained to them that I had felt excited about teaching undergraduates partly because of their diversity, and that I had been disappointed by the constraints that came in the aftermath of the tense family discipline discussion. I told them how deeply grateful I was





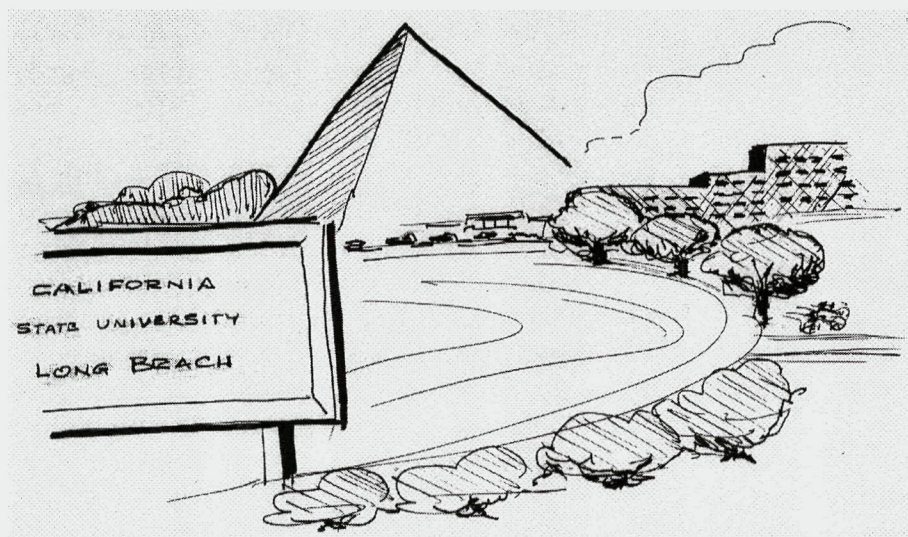
that John came forward, and how satisfied the session had made me. Applause again. I walked out of class into another world, found a colleague, and burst into tears... tears of pleasure at their pride, the complexity of their allegiances, and their disarming portrayal of family life. This was a scenario even better than I had imagined, and John's heroism had carried the day.

The story wasn't only a story about my class. There was a well-functioning institutional network of concerned faculty and administrators that provided a backdrop against which my class drama took place. Faculty had discussed the "difficult class of undergraduates." Different approaches had been put forward to deal with the subgrouping and dissonance in this

group of students. Some of the groundwork for the shift took place in field seminar, where students revisited the tension that had erupted in my class. The result had been additional conflict and some counseling of students. John had been encouraged to take a chance with the other students and to come forward with his own feelings. And he did, in an effective and dramatic way in my class session.

This was a turning point for my class as it was for me—a point of inclusion and unity, of belonging in social work, belonging to this group of students, belonging in a complex multicultural world. For me it was one glorious event to symbolize our shared need to belong to the family of humans. It also symbolized the wondrous and unexpected experiences which can unfold and which exceed

expectations. It bears testimony to the versatility, resilience, and creativity of people in situations, struggling with daily challenges. There were lessons about teaching too: This class cued me to new areas of controversy, which I have since revisited. It led me to expect and embrace conflict from possibly irreconcilable and deeply held cultural perspectives. The class was a demonstration of the multiple classroom styles and expectations of today's vibrant, diverse students and an example of the creative potential that emerges in the face of diversity. Living in Los Angeles, as its population character has shifted and it has become an international city, I have often felt that I am part of an important phase of history. I'm the teacher in title, but really I'm the learner, privileged to be part of these shifting times. □



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